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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the assessment procedures initiated and used by most Canadian provinces during the past decade to describe public school reading achievement, to identify commonalities and differences among those procedures, and to comment on the significance of the identified trends. The stated purposes of evaluation included information for decision-making, the provision of comparative information across time or location, curriculum improvement, professional development, and the creation of test banks for teacher use. During the late sixties and early seventies, most provinces moved away from "departmental examinations" toward the establishment of "joint committees/task forces" on evaluation, designed to provide more public input into educational decision-making. The latter half of the seventies produced an observable movement towards the use of standardized achievement tests in the assessment of provincial progress. The early eighties saw the emergence of provincially constructed achievement tests similar in nature to commercially produced tests, but based specifically on the curricula in force in a particular province. Recent decisions in Alberta and British Columbia appear to reintroduce compulsory province-wide examinations, possibly signalling a repetition of the cycle begun in the late sixties. (BW)

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TRENDS IN CANADIAN PROVINCIAL READING ASSESSMENTS

Revised Version, June 1983

Based on paper presented to the 9th World Congress on Reading, Dublin, Ireland, 1982

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TRENDS IN CANADIAN PROVINCIAL READING ASSESSMENTS

Since literacy forms the cornerstone of our educational system, and since periodic criticism of our level of literacy appears in the media, it is evident that some form of accountability is expected of the educational system. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to examine the assessment procedures initiated and used by most Canadian provinces during the past decade to describe public school reading achievement, to identify commonalities and differences among those procedures, and to comment on the significance of the identified trends.

More specifically, this article focuses on the stated purposes of reading evaluation, trends in the types of assessments used, and some possible indicators of changes in literacy levels.

The appropriate officials at each of the ten provincial Ministries of Education was contacted and documents relating to reading assessments conducted since 1970 were requested. These provincial documents, personal correspondence with Ministry officials, and compilations of related information made available by the Manitoba Department of Education provided the data on which the generalizations in this article are based.

PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENTS

While few stated purposes of evaluation were consistent across the ten provinces, the following were generally listed. Information for decision-making was often mentioned and subsumed such reasons as accountability, assessment of objectives, funding, and grading. A second category dealt with the provision of comparative information such as comparisons among schools, school divisions, and provinces; comparisons with earlier assessments; or establishment of benchmarks for future reference. A third category consisted of curriculum improvement and its attendant purposes such as diagnosis, program modification, and summative evaluation. Professional development formed another category; this included such diverse areas as teacher education, professional development, improvement of evaluation procedures, and research. A fifth purpose dealt with the creation of test banks for teacher, school, or division use (See notes under Ontario Assessment Instrument Pool in the Selected Bibliography).

What is not always clear about the stated purposes of assessment is whether they are intended goals or achieved goals. For example, while "improvement of evaluation procedures" may be stated as a purpose, it is not clear whether teachers were actually given such training or whether the assessment procedures were simply meant to be

"exemplary" to them. In most provinces test data is not available for specific schools or even by school division due to objections by teachers' societies or associations. Some schools use provincial assessment data for grading purposes and since students know it, a variety of biases creep in which are not present in other schools. Finally, since assessment procedures change over time, results may not be particulary useful in indicating "growth" in literacy levels since the required comparisons cannot logically be made.

TRENDS IN ASSESSMENT

While the purposes for assessment vary considerably, a pattern, or trend, appears to emerge when the historical progression of assessment is examined. After a brief description of the historical events an analysis follows.

The late sixties and early seventies saw a move by most provinces (with the exception of Quebec and Nova Scotia) away from the use of "departmental examinations." These were examinations set by provincial departments of education which were required of most secondary school students in the province, especially before graduation.

On the heels of the elimination of departmental examinations came the establishment of "joint committees/task forces" on evaluation. These groups supposedly were struck to provide more public input into

educational decision-making by jointly involving various interest groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, Home and School Associations, legislative representatives, Department of Manpower, Superintendent's Association, Federation of Labour, and others. These groups, naturally, were in addition to the more common representations from Faculties of Education, Teachers' Associations, school administrators and teachers.

The latter half of the seventies produced an observeable movement towards the use of standardized achievement tests in the assessment of provincial progress. Commonly the tests used were the Stanford Achievement Test, the Metropolitan Achievement Test, or the Canadian Test of Basic Skills (initially related to the Iowa Test of Basic Skills).

The above movement, however, was short-lived since the end of the seventies and the early eighties saw the emergence of a unique development--provincially constructed achievement tests similar in nature to commercially produced tests. Tests such as these were developed for systematic testing programs at the elementary, junior secondary, and senior secondary levels (i.e. grades 4, 8, 12 or grades 3, 6, 9, 12 or grades 5, 8, 11).

While the format and technical sophistication resembled commercially produced tests, the tests were based specifically on the curricula in force in a particular province. Furthermore, the test domains and test items

were developed through broad-based consensus and through consultation with teacher groups. Some provinces even began to collect additional information such as intelligence test data, attitude information, amount of time spent watching television, and time spent on buses to be used in conjunction with the reading achievement data.

In one sense this movement may be interpreted as reflecting the completion of a cycle of curriculum-based testing, generalized skill testing, and a return to curriculum-dependent assessment. The Zeitgeist also magnified the "accountability" issue and the attendant testing movement along with considerably more test sophistication on behalf of the teachers whose training was often extended (i.e. the teaching force consisted of more teachers with higher degrees). The research literature also reflects a recognition of a variety of personality, learning-style, and demographic variables as affecting reading achievement.

Since accountability was also a politically sensitive issue, the problem of sampling took on a new significance. That is, while one-half of the provinces tested all students in the designated grades, others used 10% samples which still involved many more students than were necessary to make predictions with reasonable accuracy. However, it did mean that typically some students were tested in each school and in each school division thus giving the assessment programs a higher profile.

GROWTH OR DECLINE IN LITERACY?

Perhaps the most important question the public would like to have answered is: Has our level of literacy grown or declined? While some provincial assessments were conducted to answer this question, they are not able to do so until at least the second cycle of evaluations has been completed. To date only one province, British Columbia, has completed the second cycle of the new wave of assessments.

What, then, can be learned from the present data? While it is hazardous, at best, to speculate on results obtained in such diverse ways, a few noticeable similarities may be detected. Since panels were used to judge the adequacy of the assessment results in many cases, it is possible to speculate about those areas which were judged adequate or inadequate.

Three of the four western provinces--British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba--have conducted similar reading assessment programs. Generally, panels rated the student performance on the provincial tests as "satisfactory", however, there were areas of less than satisfactory achievement as well. At the lower elementary level (grades 3 or 4) word attack skills were generally rated as satisfactory and meaning vocabulary was rated as a "strength area" in two provinces. Comprehension skills

were satisfactory generally but one province showed this area to be a strength area as well.

At the middle school level (grades 6, 8 or 9) achievement was generally considered to be satisfactory although two provinces still showed meaning vocabulary to be a strength area. In the comprehension domain, one province showed strong applied skills but another showed some specific weaknesses in drawing implications and with maps and charts.

Assessments in the senior secondary grades (grades 10 & 12) exhibited some erosion of the vocabulary skills as well as some deterioration in the higher level comprehension skills (i.e. drawing implications, evaluative comprehension). Study skills were marginal in one province, satisfactory in one, and satisfactory/very satisfactory in the third.

While these descriptive results must be viewed with utmost caution, they do appear to flag a gradual shift from strong skill development in the lower elementary grades, to a few areas of weakness at the middle school level, and this trend appears to continue into the secondary schools.

For those provinces using standardized or criterion-referenced tests it is difficult to judge results, but where they are presented in a chronological manner the figures generally indicate improvement over time (i.e. improvement in the percentage reaching particular objectives or increase in average percentile rank). It is

difficult, however, to judge what size of unit of change is significant in considering such results.

These trends, although tentative, are somewhat similar to those found in the National Assessment of Educational Progress in the U.S.A.(as reported in Reading, Thinking, and Writing, 1981). It is difficult to decide whether our standards are more stringent at the senior levels or whether the de-emphasis of the teaching of reading at the higher levels is reflected in the assessment results.

CONCLUSIONS

While it is hazardous and difficult to make generalizations about ten such diverse provinces, an effort has been made to encapsulate the results of the respective reading assessment programs for the reader.

Reading assessment programs are carried out for a variety of reasons and these include accountability, program modification, data bank accumulation, grading and professional development.

Historically one can observe a gradual shifting away from compulsory, year-end, secondary school evaluations (late sixties and early seventies); a move towards use of standardized reading achievement tests (late seventies); and the development of curriculum-based provincial assessments in the eighties.

However, recent decisions (1983) by the Alberta and

the British Columbia Ministries of Education appear to re-introduce compulsory province-wide examinations, at least at the grade twelve level. This development may be signalling a repetition of the cycle begun in the late sixties.

The politically sensitive nature of assessment programs is manifested in the "sampling procedures" used in these programs as well as in the selection and representation on "joint committees" appointed to guide the evaluation process.

Most provinces have developed cyclical assessment programs (every 3-4 years) using either self-constructed instruments or commercially available tests.

Finally, and perhaps the most encouraging observation is a perceptable move toward the recognition that other social, environmental, and demographic variables are important adjuncts to the interpretion of achievment variables. It is also encouraging to see the intensive involvement of teachers in the development of curriculum-based evaluation, in the selection of test items, and the interpretation of assessment outcomes.

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